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ABSTRACT

Due to existing demographic trends, language minority students comprise an increasing proportion of students in the Southwest and in urban areas. For these language minority students, the lack of strong writing skills impedes academic performance at the university level and then later in the workplace. To test writing attitudes, a study involved students enrolled in two sections of freshman English composition in a large Southwestern university. Students in both classes were administered a pre- and post-test attitude survey to determine their attitudes about writing. The control sections received traditional written comments on their written drafts. The treatment section received very little written response but lengthy one-on-one counseling via cassette-taped comments on their written drafts to coach them and assist them through the revision stages of the writing process. Direction t-test comparisons did not indicate a significant difference in the pre- and post-test essays for the two sections. However, the analysis of pre- and post-test attitude surveys did indicate a statistically significant difference in attitude toward writing, with the treatment group demonstrating a more positive attitude than the control group. Notably, Hispanics in the experimental classes seemed to respond even more enthusiastically to the taped feedback than the Anglo students. (TB)

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COACHING WRITING IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS WITH ORAL COMMENTARY

ED 402 578

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By Carol Price and Linda Holman

For many, the act of writing is tortuous. The apprehension that student writers feel can reflect on their self-identity due to the insecurity and fear of exposure and can be excaberated by insensitive instructors (Bruffee, 1980; Buley-Meissner 1989; Rose, 1985; and Weiner, 1982). Teachers who grade students' papers, in turn, find their work arduous and frustrating as they mark what seem to be the same errors, again and again, in student compositions and other written work (Bartholomae 1993; Shaughnessey, 1977). As taught, grammatical rules and structures do not transfer easily to students' written work (Elbow, 1981; Murray, 1985; Noguchi, 1991). The problems experienced by many with writing do not end when they exit the classroom, as evidenced by the plethora of writing style books available for every professional area of work, and comments by businessmen and policy makers regarding the quality of education our graduates bring to the workforce (Doheny-Farina, 1989; Graff, 1988; Lutz, 1989; Matalene, 1989; Mathes, 1989).

Problems of translating school-writing experiences to the needs of the workplace increase as the population becomes ever more multicultural, especially in border areas. Due to existing demographic trends, language minority students comprise an increasing proportion of students in the Southwest and urban areas. Approximately 73.7% of the entire Hispanic population is concentrated in California, Texas, New York, and Florida;

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Hispanics are projected to increase from 11% to 28% of the under-eighteen population in these states (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). In some southwestern states, minority children comprise approximately 50% of the school population (Valdiviseo, 1986). Typically, many urban school districts have experienced an almost complete reversal of traditional proportions of White and minority students, with minority students now composing the majority school population (Rudea & Mercer, 1985). As these students pursue higher education at the community college or university level, faculty, administratiave, and policy leadership need to examine programand course offerings to faciliate the retention and performance of minority students, many of whom require financial and academic assistance (Hodgkinson, 1985).

For these language minority students, the lack of strong writing skills impedes academic performance at the university level and then later in the workplace. The problems presented by inadequate writing skills are significantly more pronounced for language minority students (Carson, 1992; Kroll, 1990; Snow & Brinton, 1990). Although for all students, receiving a paper and finding a multitude of corrections is disheartening, negatively affects self-esteem, and can lead to writing apprehension, for the multicultural students the problem can be more severe, even leading to failure and quitting school. Sometimes known as "writer's block," writing apprehension can additionally result in a predisposition to avoid writing tasks, a problem that can cripple a promising career should that graduating student even be able to find employment. In their 1993 study of adult language minority students, Masny and Foxall found that low-achieving writers

and female writers were more apprehensive and that "students overall (regardless of achievement) were more concerned with form than with content" (p. 50). Additionally, correlation analysis determined that students often appreciated the need to write but that writing apprehension reduced their willingness to enroll in additional writing courses (p. 54).

Instructor feedback plays a definitive role in defining a student's interest in compositionand self-esteem. By writing discouraging remarks and corrections over entire papers, instructors can destroy students' self-confidence (Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1991). A survey of language minority students enrolled in a freshman composition course at one large southwestern university indicated they face problems different from those experienced by the majority student population. For example, Margie reported:

> My teacher did not make any effort to help the people who could not read or understand English very well. Someone as educated as he was should have helped us. His behavior brought a great deal of turmoil in my feelings. The problem became so acute that all the Spanish-speaking students sat on one side of the room by themselves to try and help each other through this class. All the English speaking students would be laughing or joking around on their side of the room, while we sat quiet, feeling very insecure.

In the same vein, Fernie reported:

> My worst experiences in school have always been with my English teachers. Mrs. W. was a 65-year old obnoxious teacher who used to drag herself into the classroom whining and complaining how terrible and uneducated we were. Since English was my second language, I've always had difficulty understanding it. I was doing very poorly and my self-esteem was very low. I began to think I was retarded because I didn't understand correct English that well. Mrs. W. always seemed to correct me on my English with her stupid sarcastic remarks. I now understand that Mrs. W. didn't know any better, but it really affected the way I see myself as an English speaker.

When they care to, and they should care to, instructors can bolster

marginal students' sense of self-worth and enable them to empower themselves through adapting the writing process to their own needs, using peer groups, special counseling, and mentoring (Harris, 1986; Mittan, 1989; Rose, 1989). Through extra praise and guidance as well as one-on-one counseling, encouraging and modeling, instructors can assist all students in becoming better writers (Berlin, 1982; Shaughnessy, 1987; Spandel & Stiggins, 1990).

This study began by involving students enrolled in two sections of freshman English composition in a large Southwestern university. At the beginning of the semester, students in both sections completed a demographic data survey to gather pertinent demographic information. Students in both sections were administered a pretest and posttest writing exercise to assess their level of writing ability and a pretest and posttest attitude survey to determine their attitudes toward writing. The control section received traditional written comments on their written drafts. The treatment section received very little written response but lengthy one-on-one counseling via cassette-taped comments on their written drafts to coach them and assist them through the revision stages of the writing process.

Directional t-test comparisons did not indicate a significant difference in the pre-and posttest essays for the two sections ($p>.54$). However, the analyis of pre- and posttest attitude surveys did indicate a statistically significant difference in attitude toward writing ($p.003$), with the treatment group demonstrating a more positive attitude than the control group. Additionally, when examining the responses of Hispanic students, the analysis of pre and posttest attitude surveys indicated a statistically significant

difference in attitude toward writing (p. 004), with the treatment group again demonstrating a more positive attitude than the control group.

Selected comments of the treatment group support the statistical findings. Comments included "Sometimes you don't understand the teacher's handwriting and with the tape you can hear the comments they say" (Jessica); "It helped me because it was coming from you, like if you were speaking to me. And I was able to understand what to fix on my paper, rather than looking at my paper wondering what to do" (Sylvia); "I could rewind and listen to what I needed to focus on the most" (Gaby); "comments made on tape made it seem like I was having a personal conference. It really helps the student fix mistakes on the paper" (Margie); and "I liked the fact that you can hear exactly whet the teacher wants corrected and she does not write on your paper" (Ivan).

As Margie indicates, a personal conference can help but most teachers do not have time to have a conference with every student about every writing assignment. And conferences can be counter-productive, as well, the authoritative atmosphere intimidating the student (Moore, 1989). Evidence showed that taping comments to students about their writing allowed student writers the privacy to revise in a relaxed atmosphere at their own speed, which was especially helpful to second language writers (Patrie, 1989).

Deciding that although the posttest writing scores of the experimental section in the pilot test did not show significant difference from the comparison section, the change in attitude justified further research. A large scale study was undertaken in the spring of 1995 using ten volunteer community college composition teachers. These teachers were asked to apply

the same writing as process curriculum in both the treatment and the comparison classes, responding to student drafts as helpfully and positively as possible. The experimental classrooms received their teacher-assisted revision comments on cassette tapes. Again pre and post semester writing prompts were administered, as well as pre and post semester attitude surveys. Sentence by sentence analysis of student revised drafts showed that the experimental groups had accomplished a greater number of successful revisions, and again the attitude surveys elicited enthusiasm in the experimental classrooms: A significant number of students ($p>.002$) who had circled "not at all" on the surveys at the beginning of the semester to statements such as "I'm a good writer," "I usually like writing," "I look forward to getting my essays back," and "I appreciate it when my teacher discusses my paper with me" by the end of the semester circled "usually" or "very much" for the same statements at the end of the semester. Open-ended questions again allowed insight into student attitudes about the taped teacher-assisted revision, for example: "it really makes me concentrate more on what I've written" (Amy); "I felt like I had a better understanding of what I was doing" (Pedro); and "It helped me see what parts of my essay needed to be polished and worked on" (Josepha).

Notably, the Hispanics in the experimental classes seemed to respond even more enthusiastically to the taped feedback than the Anglo students. they showed change correlations that the Anglo students did not: "I'm a good writer; I like writing" ($p>.001$) "I like writing and I don't mind getting my papers corrected" ($p>.006$) and "I like writing and I look forward to getting

my papers back" ($p>.001$). Since the pilot test showed that Spanish-speaking bilingual students were less likely to consider themselves good writers at the beginning of the semester, having been struggling with the basics of a second language and suffering from prior negative feedback from teachers, the experimental taped feedback was considered even more a success with second language writers than with native writers. In fact, significantly more Hispanic writers ($p>.005$) said that the "teachers have helped me a lot with my writing."

As we continue to search for better ways to communicate with and encourage our language minority students, it is possible that taped dialogue, providing personalized, one-on-one individualization may provide a more effective context for language and writing development. By using techniques that reverse our students' negative attitudes toward their writing, we are assisting them in their first steps toward becoming proficient in written communication.

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